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The Burnsian Palimpsest: Robert Burns in American Cultural Memory, c. 1840-1866

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The Burnsian Palimpsest: Robert Burns in American Cultural Memory, c. 1840-1866

The memory of Burns...The west winds are murmuring it...

Ralph Waldo Emerson (Ballantine 1959: 37)

~

Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as 'ours'...

Jan Assmann (Assmann 2008: 111)

Introduction

Arguably more so than any other eighteenth-century literary figure, the political and popular legacy of Robert Burns has been continually contested, revised and appropriated to various ends. As recently as the 2015 UK General Election, the Scottish branch of the right-wing populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) attempted to win the hearts (if not the minds) of Scottish voters by producing posters emblazoned with lines from Burns's 'The Dumfries Volunteers';¹ while, previously, the opposing Scottish Nationalist Party strategically launched an electoral campaign on the poet's birthday (Tempest 2005). Contests were also waged over Burns's presumed political leanings during the 2014 Scottish Referendum, as he was variably cast as a Unionist or Nationalist across several media outlets (Maddox 2012).

Appropriations of Burns in nineteenth-century America were equally multiflorous and complex. The idea that Burns was 'a friend to liberty in the United States' (Pittock 2011: 11) has endured due to a critical (and popular) enthusiasm for maintaining links between the poet and influential nineteenth-century Americans such as Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Lincoln. However, as I have argued elsewhere, there is evidence to suggest that Whitman and Emerson were not wholly enamoured by Burns's poetry and that their praise was more ceremonial than innate (Sood 2015: 230-236). The conflation of these—albeit important—individual 'memories' should not be mistaken for proof that Burns was cohesively and unanimously remembered as a beacon of idealised national American values, however appealing the notion might be. As we shall see, such a sweeping assertion belies the complexity of the competing modes of remembrance that preserved the poet, as well as the contemporary plurality of 'national' American values that shaped these commemorations.

Christopher A. Whatley has recently addressed Burns's politically divisive legacy in historical Scottish contexts (Whatley 2016). Yet the malleability of Burns's reputation in America requires much further attention and, unsurprisingly, is riddled with transnational entanglements. This article addresses two lesser-known (and deeply contrasting) appropriations of Burns during the decades that straddled the

¹ For an informed discussion of the contested 'Unionist' sympathies of 'The Dumfries Volunteers' see Liam McIlvanney. *Burns the Radical: poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, 2002), pp. 238-40

American Civil War. Where Frederick Douglass remembered Burns as being kin to an African-American slave who ‘broke loose from the moorings which society had thrown around him’ (Douglass 1846), the Ku Klux Klan incorporated the poet’s works into their founding constitutional document and initiation ceremonies (Craig Wade 1998: 34). Implicit in both articulations of remembrance, then, was the subjective promotion of sectional identity and racialised values. That Burns, a poet renowned for his egalitarian ethos, was championed by the most prominent African-American abolitionist of the nineteenth-century is not entirely surprising. As if the melodic counterpart to Josiah Wedgwood’s famed anti-slavery medallion (‘Am I Not A Man And A Brother?’), Burns’s ‘A Man’s a Man, for A’ That’ was frequently appropriated by Douglass and fellow abolitionists in speeches, pamphlets, manifestos and songbooks. Yet the political appropriation of Burns also occurred in Southern pro-slavery states, where his works and reputation—symbolic of Scotland and an ancestral homeland for so many—were tied to a sense of authentic white Anglo-Celtic or Scots heritage. The decades surrounding the Civil War saw an increasing vogue, in several Southern states, for tracing genealogical ties back to various strains of white heritage (Hanlon 2013: 17-40). As Clarence Gohdes remarked in 1953, the ‘Pulaski Den did well to make use of Bobby Burns, for many of them were of Scotch Presbyterian background’ (Gohdes 1953: 23). The examples I have chosen are purposefully polarising and, of course, require much further analysis. Nonetheless, pointing out such deviations in appropriation and memory (who else might connect UKIP, the SNP, Frederick Douglass and the KKK?) unquestionably renders Burns a worthy subject when discussing the complex interrelationships between memory, history, and national identity in a transatlantic literary context.

Indeed, the question of whether such conflicting memories and appropriations can even be considered instances of ‘national’ cultural remembrance must also be addressed. Correspondingly, the first section of this article engages with recent scholarship on national memory and proposes that the cultural memory of Burns in nineteenth-century America might best be conceived as a ‘palimpsest’. I borrow the term from Jay Winter, who argues for a more ‘dynamic approach’ to cultures of national remembrance in transnational contexts, where sites of memory (in this case Burns) can ‘become reused or altered’ for political purpose while still bearing trace of ‘earlier forms’ (Winter 2009: 170). Like Winter’s conceptual ‘palimpsests’ (transnational sites of memory) commemorations of Burns comprised of an overlay of variable messages, but were bound together by source (Burns), nation (United States), and period (1844-1866). This commemorative variability will be revealed through detailed case studies of Frederick Douglass and the Ku Klux Klan.

I conclude by underlining the importance of sectional intricacies when considering the influence, memory, and remediation of literature in transatlantic contexts, particularly in the antebellum United States. Transatlantic scholars have done much to better highlight and veer from the restrictive dangers of unifying national contexts in recent years. Yet, a greater awareness of divergent sectional, regional and indeed racial factors *within* transatlantic and transnational contexts remains a pertinent issue, as will be demonstrated by the case of Burns in the nineteenth-century United States.

Burns and American National Remembrance

Studies on cultures of national remembrance have continued to boom in recent decades, partly catalysed by a rejuvenated sense of engagement with Pierre Nora’s

monumental seven-work volume, *Les lieux de mémoire*. Nora pointed to how, as a by-product of modernisation, national feeling is actively cultivated and maintained through forms of objectified culture. For Nora, ‘national memories’ of the past could no longer be communicated through spontaneous, or ‘lived’, experience. Consequently, Nora argued, national communities had to construct and draw upon forms of objectified culture, or rather, *lieux de mémoire* (which translates as ‘sites’ or ‘realms’ of memory) in order to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with the past (and thus harmonise feeling). These *lieux*, or ‘sites’, might range from ceremonies, statues, museums, anniversaries, flags, buildings to outstanding individuals and myths; with the binding principle that they, whether physically or spiritually, uphold shared memories of the past that are consecrated as the quintessence of the nation (Nora 1989: 20). Nora based his project on French national identity, pointing to ‘sites’ of memory such as the Court of Versailles, Eiffel Tower and Joan of Arc; and articulating their interdependent relationship(s) with French nationhood. Nora also suggested that his project might easily be used to establish patterns of national commemoration in other countries; consequently leading to similar undertakings in the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Italy and elsewhere (Schulze 2009: foreword, vi-viii).

In response, Alex Tyrell has suggested that, in nineteenth-century Scotland, ‘Burns had become what Pierre Nora has called a *lieu de mémoire* in that the public celebration and commemoration of the poet ‘helped to give Scots a notion of the past’ and shaped ‘forms of Scottish national identity’ (Tyrell 2005: 43). Tyrell also observes, however, the ideological elements implicit in the construction of national memory sites, pointing to how the Robert Burns Festival at Ayr in 1844 interlocked with other events (such as Queen Victoria’s first visit to Scotland) to promote an ideological identity that asserted ‘aristocratic paternalism in Scotland’ (ibid). Leith Davis has also commented on Burns as a nineteenth century *lieu de mémoire*; further outlining the multi-faceted processes by which this was achieved. Davis points to the evolution of Burns Clubs from local gatherings to ‘international sites where ex-patriot Scots joined together’ and the effects of ‘international print networks’ that, through the circulation of biographies, ‘helped make Burns and Scotland synonymous’ (Davis 2012: 201). In accordance with this, Murray Pittock and Christopher A. Whatley, with particular emphasis on ‘space, gesture, image and object’, have described the nineteenth-century ‘Burns phenomenon’ as being a ‘complex and multi-dimensional’ *lieu de mémoire* in that a ‘complex realm of memorialisation’—celebratory events, images, objects, texts among others—combined to reinforce certain ‘dimensions of Scottish national memory’ (Pittock and Whatley 2014: 58).

However, the issue of Burns functioning as a *lieu de mémoire* for Scotland in the United States is more complex and problematic. On one hand, we must acknowledge how Burns and his works helped to cement and articulate the identity of expatriate Scots in America (or their descendants). From the early 1800s onwards, expatriate Scots attended St Andrew’s Society dinners to toast the poet and their country; local poets preserved and adapted Scots language verse and songs inspired by Burns; tartan and other Scottish imagery often adorned commemorative events; and biographical texts provided (and thus preserved) detailed (subjective) accounts of the ‘Scotch character’ of Burns (namely James Currie’s *The Works*).

To another extreme, the idea that Burns ‘fought side by side’ with the ‘sentiments of freedom’ and ‘Liberty—American Liberty!’ (Ballantine 1959: 3) also suggests a (rather fragile) case for him representing a *lieu de mémoire* for nineteenth-century American national identity. Burns’s self-fashioning as ‘Scotia’s Bard’

(appealing to the diaspora) and poetic fascination for American ‘Liberty’² (ripe for American identity-formation) certainly helps to explain some aspects of why his image was mobilised to a far greater extent than any other British Romantic in the period.³

However, particularly in the antebellum United States, ‘national identity’ was hardly uniform and comprised of a plurality of forms. Indeed, the widely differing sectional appropriations of Burns discussed below (simultaneously a symbolic figure for the Northern abolitionist and the Southern planter) render it problematic to consider the poet as a signifier of a unifying ‘national’ narrative in the United States, whether Scottish *or* American. It is thus the very ambivalence of a singular ‘collective’ or ‘national’ identity that makes considering Burns as a *lieu de mémoire* in the United States so complex.

One of the major discrepancies that twenty-first century scholars have raised with Nora’s concept is its limiting and restrictive emphasis on ‘national’ frameworks. In a 2009 collection titled *Memory, History, and Colonialism: Engaging with Pierre Nora in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts* (edited by Indra Sengupta and Hagen Schulze), an interlinking series of essays argued for the extended and adapted use of Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* through a theoretical revision that ‘could fit the contours of colonial and postcolonial societies, which were and remain transnational in character’ (Winter 2009: 167). Focused on imperial history, the collection widens the concept to better address the ‘conflicting nature of collective memory’ that is characteristic of colonial and postcolonial contexts (Sengupta 2009: 4). Several examples of *lieux de mémoire* are given that (rather than asserting and maintaining a cohesive feeling of national continuity) capture the pluralistic and subjective nature of remembrance and identity. One case study, for example, is focused on war memorials to Indian troops (both on the Western front and in India) that emanate inherent ambiguities. Questions over ‘Why did the men buried there die? Did they help liberate India or renew its oppression?’ riddle the same memory site as multiple conflicting, yet inseparable, narratives are embedded within (Winter 2009: 168). Sir Edwin Lutyen’s India Gate or All India War Memorial in New Delhi, for example, do not stabilise national identity but instead reflects plural identities, contradictory histories and contested ‘national’ narratives.

To return, then, to the similarly complex idea of Burns as a figurative *lieu de mémoire* in the nineteenth-century United States, we might also identify, within one ‘nation’, multiple and at times competing layers of memory. The (re)constitutions of Burns as a ‘site of memory’ were not assigned with fixed meanings and symbols pertaining to a national population. Rather, ‘the memory of Burns’ was fluid, repeatedly reshaped, and reflective of multiple identities. In developing a ‘wider vocabulary’ for a ‘transnational’ age and advancing the foundational principles of Nora’s *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Jay M. Winter has introduced the conceptual term

². Burns wrote several poems, songs and letters in response to conceptual ideas about post-revolutionary American ‘Liberty’. See Roger Fechner, ‘Burns and American Liberty’, in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns; a bicentenary celebration*, ed. by Kenneth Simpson (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 274-288

³. The possible exception here might be Sir Walter Scott. For more on the popularity of Scott in America, see Joseph Rezek, *London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America: A Study of Cultural Relations, 1750-1835* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1975)

‘palimpsest’; connoting a repeated overlay of memories that transmit variable messages but are bound together by an original source. Due to the hybrid, conflicting nature of cultural memory in transnational contexts, Winter suggests that colonial and postcolonial sites of memory, or *lieux de mémoire*, might each be considered as a ‘palimpsest, an overwritten text[...]something that is reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form’ (ibid: 173). For Winter, ‘memories are overwritten time and again’ and even when ‘considering the same event or object, each memory is unique’(ibid: 170). Thus, conceiving of memory sites as ‘palimpsests’ is more appropriately fluid than retorting to more rigid, inflexible terms or metaphors that fail to reflect on the layered, multi-dimensional nature of cultural memory.

Winter’s proposed transnational evolution of Nora’s theory is, of course, formulated around the more rigidly defined postcolonial nations. Here, America’s ‘troubled postcoloniality’ (Mackenthum 2000: 34) must not go unnoticed. Scholars have rightly warned against constructing false, transhistorical comparisons between nineteenth century America’s struggle for cultural independence and postcolonial Africa or India. Eric Cheyfitz, for example, reminds us that indigenizing early European immigrants and settlers ‘denies the previous and ongoing existence of indigenous cultures in America’ (Cheyftiz 1993: 118); while Peter Hulme argues that post-revolutionary America—through its heightened effort to continue the European project of imperial expansion—was ‘postcolonial and colonizing at the same time’ (Hulme 1995: 122). In adopting Winter’s postcolonial metaphor, I wish to follow Gesa Mackenthum distinction of ‘taking a postcolonial *perspective* on nineteenth-century America’ (Mackenthum 2000: 37) rather than claiming it a postcolonial country. Mackenthum notes the importance of postulating ‘a fundamental difference between the bilateral colonial, and later postcolonial, relationship between the English mother country and its American colonists’ and the ‘multilateral or transnational colonial relationship between the Anglo-Saxon colonists (later American nationalists) and African and American indigenous groups’ (ibid: 36) that were subjected to violent dispossession and slavery. Acknowledging this double-stranded postcoloniality (simultaneously liberated but also colonizing) might also allow us to better examine the complexity of nineteenth-century American race relations and the country’s continuing involvement in the slave-based Atlantic colonial system up to the Civil War. Particularly when discussing appropriations of Burns by Frederick Douglass and the Ku Klux Klan—each holding starkly contrasting visions of a ‘national’ future—Winter’s perspective of postcolonial memory sites as ‘palimpsests’ remains appropriate.

As will be further revealed, it is near impossible to find one ‘shared’ or national story when unpacking the poet as a multi-dimensional *lieu de mémoire* or ‘site of memory’ in the United States. Yet equally, these multi-dimensional ‘memories’ and remediations should not be considered as entirely separate or isolated acts; given they stem from the same source, espouse various conceptions of the American ‘nation’, and are bound together by specific geo-chronological parameters. Consider, then, the two divergent modes of commemoration outlined below as forming a ‘Burnsian Palimpsest’; replete with visible but overwritten layers of memory relating to Robert Burns.

Frederick Douglass, Burns and US Abolitionism

There has been a recent surge of interest in the speeches that Frederick Douglass delivered in Scotland during his anti-slavery tour of Britain and Ireland, primarily due

to the continuing scholarly attempts to recover the memory of Scottish connections with slavery and the black Atlantic (Brown 2016). It was during this tour that Douglass visited the birthplace of Robert Burns in 1846. A fuller examination of Douglass's written account of the visit reveals the extent to which his memory of Burns was shaped by socio-political tensions and, in particular, abolitionist discourses. Alluding to a famous Scottish poet (indeed figurative site of national significance) was certainly one way for Douglass to capture the imagination of local audiences during his oratory tour of Scotland. Yet it would be incorrect to state that he systematically appropriated the poet solely to bolster white Scottish support for American abolition. Douglass was long acquainted with Burns's poetry, having purchased the 1833 Philadelphia edition, printed by J. Crissy, as his 'first book' after his 'escape from slavery', and later gifting it to his son as a 'keepsake' over three decades later in 1867 ([Anon] 2016). Yet, the rhetorical and thematic parallels between 'A Fugitive Slave Visiting the Birth-Place of Robert Burns' and his contemporary oratory proclamations in 1846 still serve to highlight a distinct correlation between Douglass's individual memory and the abolitionist discourses that surrounded him.

A brief consideration of Douglass's 1846 speech in Paisley, delivered just weeks before his visit to Ayr, alongside his letter about Burns drives home the point. Where Burns (as described in Douglass's letter) had been trapped 'in the moorings which society had thrown around him' (Douglass 1846), African-Americans were described (in the Paisley speech) as 'clanking their chains, and calling upon Britons to aid them' (Douglass [1846] 1979: 1.240). Similarly, where 'Burns lived in the midst of a bigoted and besotted clergy' (Douglass 1846), the Paisley speech condemned the bigotry of a church (the Free Church of Scotland) that 'comes forward and holds up the slaveholder as being Christian' (Douglass [1846] 1979: 1.240). Douglass's epistolary description of how Burns battled a 'corrupt generation' plagued by 'a shallow brained aristocracy' (Douglass 1846) also resonates with his protests in Paisley against 'the man whose pockets are lined with the gold with which I ought to have been educated' (Douglass [1846] 1979: 1.240). The theme of pious hypocrisy is also implicit throughout. Acknowledging the poet's alleged misgivings in his letter, Douglass maintained that Burns was 'yet more faultless than many who have come down to us in the pages of history as saints' (Douglass 1846). In a similar condemnation in Paisley he remarked: 'The Free Church is doing more for infidelity and atheism than all the infidels in Scotland combined' (Douglass [1846] 1979: 1.240). Douglass's targeted attack on the Free Church of Scotland, founded in 1843 after the Great Disruption, was the result of Free Church missionaries accepting monetary donations from American slaveholders; thus partly inspiring Douglass's 'Send Back the Money!' campaign and tour in Scotland. In order to acquire the fullest understanding of the social discourses that shaped Douglass's memory of Burns, then, it is crucial to acknowledge that 'A Fugitive Slave Visiting the Birth-Place of Robert Burns' was written at the height of his mission to exert pressure on the United States by increasing international sympathy and support for abolition. In his own emphatic words, he was intent on uniting the people of 'Scotland, England, Ireland, Canada, Mexico, and even the red Indians [to join] with us and against slavery' (ibid). It is hardly surprising, then, that Douglass would draw on a poet who, in 'A man's a man for a that' similarly espoused transnational unification through 'sense and worth, o'er a' the earth'.

That the reprinting of Douglass's letter functioned, and continues to function, as a form of commemorative preservation is clear in that it has influenced several

transatlantic constructions of the poet, specifically among African-Americans who came to regard Burns as a voice of liberty, equality and brotherhood. As Alan Rice astutely points out, Douglass ignited a ‘strategic Celto-phia’ (Rice 2003: 213) for African-American writers, perhaps most famously iterated in recent years by the late Maya Angelou who, like Douglass before her, made ‘a pilgrimage to ‘Burns Country’ and identified the poet as the ‘first white man’ who understood that ‘a human being was a human being and we are more alike than unlike’ (Angelou 2016). With regards to nineteenth-century abolitionism in the United States, Thomas Keith has traced instances of where ‘Man was made to mourn’ and ‘Is there for honest poverty’ was used to rouse public support (Keith 2009) with the former song being simultaneously claimed as a ‘Masonic Anthem’ on both sides of the Atlantic. Similarly, Clark McGinn (McGinn 2015) has provided an informative list of quotes in which Burns was invoked by prominent black and white nineteenth-century abolitionists, including Samuel Ringgold Ward (1817-1866); Gerrit Smith (1797-1874); Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887); and William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879).

In the build up to—and during—the American Civil War, pro-Union writers and orators regularly drew on the memory of Burns and specifically the phrase ‘a man’s a man for a that’ to win support for the abolitionist cause and promote messages of equality and brotherhood beyond the boundaries of racial confines. Amalgamating ‘A man’s a Man for a that’ with ‘Scots Wha Hae’, William Lloyd Garrison rhetorically questioned ‘Who would be a traitor knave? Who so base as be a slave?’ before declaring that ‘a man’s a man for a that’ ([Anon] 1854). An article in the *National anti-slavery Standard* urged Americans to recognise that regardless of ‘complexion [sic] a man’s a man for a that’ while Frederick Douglass, in encouraging ‘colored’ men to enlist in the Union Army, powerfully suggested that the ‘self-evident truths’ contained in the Declaration of Independence ought to be reduced to practice, and that, whatever may be the color of his skin, ‘a man’s a man for a’ that’ (Douglass [1863] 2016). Though these examples are centred on the aphorismic adoption and appropriation of one specific line (‘a man’s a man’s for a that’), the cultural preservation of Burns (or rather a line of his poetry in this case) through public speeches and text remained linked to contemporary abolitionist discourses or values. This is made explicit in William Wells Brown’s 1848 adaption of Burns’s most famous egalitarian anthem. Where Burns derides the ‘coward-slave’ who bows to hierarchal authority, Brown—echoing Wedgewood’s emblematic sentiment—disrupts any distinction between man and dark-skinned slave:

Though stripped of all the dearest rights
Which nature claims and a’ that,
There’s that which in the slave unites
To make the man for a’ that.
For a’ that and a’ that,
Though dark his skin, and a’ that,
We cannot rob him of his kind,
The slave’s a man, for a’ that. (Brown 1849: 44)

Quite remarkably, Brown’s collection, which adapted Scottish and Irish melodies, also contained antislavery lyrics set to Burns’s ‘Auld Lang Syne’ (‘I Am An Abolitionist’; ‘Scots Wha Hae’ (‘On To Victory’); and ‘Sweet Afton’ (‘I’ll Be Free! I’ll Be Free!)).

Of course, the posthumous use of Burns by abolitionists remains an uncomfortable topic given the poet's increasingly debated and somewhat ambiguous attitudes towards slavery and abolition. With specific regards to Burns's poetic use of 'coward slave', Nigel Leask notes the 'transferential' use of 'slave' (that is, not literally denoting African chattel slavery) in eighteenth-century political discourse to describe various class-based relationships of negative feudal dependence (Leask 2009: 47). Yet, if Burns's poetics might be explained, his unfulfilled emigration plans to work on a Jamaican plantation remain more problematic.⁴ Indeed, the wider discussion of Burns and slavery itself reveals much about the selective dynamics of cultural memory and collective remembrance, as Michael Morris has outlined in a chapter of his recent study *Scotland and the Caribbean, c. 1740-1833: Atlantic Archipelagos*. Where Morris, also responding to Pierre Nora's concept of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, unpacks the memory of Burns in its relation to Scottish national remembrance and identity ('the failure to recognise the wider significance of Burns' planned emigration to Jamaica' mirrors 'the marginalisation of the Caribbean plantations in Scottish national historiography') (Morris 2015: 99) we might here note the vicarious nature of cultural memory on an individual level through Douglass's memorialisation of Burns as an enslaved underdog who broke through his 'moorings'. Reflecting on the circulation of memories in mediated form (whereby text, objects, public speeches or other media are the 'carriers' of the memory) Ann Rigney notes that individuals and groups who have 'no actual connection in any biological sense with the events in question' may 'learn to identify with certain vicarious recollections' (Rigney 2005: 11).

Regardless of the uneasy ambiguity that continues to pervade the issue of Burns in relation to slavery and abolition, the (mediated) memorialisation of the poet by Douglass and other prominent abolitionists in the nineteenth-century United States unquestionably generated a 'working memory' (Assmann 2008: 118) that could be (re)constructed and (re)constituted through future acts of public commemoration and remembrance. Even in the twenty-first century, we might then view, for example, Kofi Annan's (then secretary general of the United Nations) enlistment of Burns into a global canon of humanitarianism with renewed interest. Speaking in 2004 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, Annan, without acknowledging but clearly drawing on Douglass's commemoration of Burns, described the poet as 'an opponent of slavery, pomposity and greed' (Annan 2004). Rather than doggedly attempt to defend, condemn or verify such a statement, it might serve us well, in terms of historical understanding, to consider more fully the cultural mechanisms at work behind the construction of such a 'memory'.

Burns and the Southern Man

The appropriation of Burns by Frederick Douglass and other prominent abolitionists has been established, yet equally important, if somewhat less palatable, is to recognise

⁴ Prior to the success of the 1786 'Kilmarnock Edition', Burns intended to sail for Jamaica to take up a position as a plantation 'bookkeeper'. For more on this contentious issue, see Gerard Carruthers, 'Robert Burns and Slavery' in *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century*, ed. by Johnny Rodger and Gerard Carruthers (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009), pp. 163-176; Murray Pittock, 'Slavery as Political Metaphor in Scotland and Ireland in the age of Burns' in *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture*, ed. by Sharon Alker, Leith Davis and Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2012), p. 201; and Clark McGinn, 'The Scotch Bard and 'The Planting Line': New Documents on Burns and Jamaica,' *Studies in Scottish Literature* 43.2 (2017): 255-266.

that the poet was also adopted by opposing groups and individuals in the Southern slave-holding States. In addressing how one source of remembrance can become invested with multiple, at times conflicting historical ‘memories’, Rigney, following Michel Foucault’s dictum of *loi de rareté*, has outlined how the ‘principle of scarcity’ affects memory through processes of ‘selectivity, convergence, recycling and transference’ (Rigney 2005: 11). In juxtaposing two broadly opposing ‘memories’ of Burns formed within the same geo-cultural and (and chronological) parameters, Rigney’s ‘principle of scarcity’ might be demonstrated to some effect in that the poet’s persona and works were selectively recycled to articulate and inform conflicting identities, values and experiences. Partly due to long and continuing associations between Burns and humanitarianism, the appropriation of the poet by prominent US abolitionists in the Civil War-era comes as relatively unsurprising. Conservative constructions of Burns, on the other hand, tend to brush against the grain of the more popular perception of Burns as a beacon of liberal egalitarianism (thus making his attitudes to slavery and abolitionism a particularly thorny issue).

That the Southern, agrarian male planter class prided themselves on ideals of honour, loyalty and integrity is a popular notion verging on stereotype that, arguably, remains powerful today judging by the Republican party’s (GOP) emphasis on restoring ‘honour’ and ‘integrity’ to ‘a federal system of government’ in the lead up to the Southern Republican Leadership Conference, held at Oklahoma City in 2015 ([Anon], 2015). More detailed studies have, of course, challenged this monolithic view of Southern masculinity; highlighting the complexity and variety of male experience in the nineteenth century American South. In a 2004 volume titled *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, editors Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover compiled a provocative collection of essays that map some of the intricate and shifting frameworks—variable by class, religion, race and era—that shaped male identities before, during and after the American Civil War. The opening essay by Harry S. Laver documents how eighteenth-century masculine ideals of civic virtue (whereby Southern manhood was identified with being ‘head of household’ and placing the good of the community and nation ‘above individual desires’) were swept aside in the early nineteenth century by a renewed sense of individualism that promoted the unapologetic pursuit of ‘wealth, power and self-advancement’ (Laver 2004: 1). Laver argues that the American Civil War provided a new opportunity for men to demonstrate their manhood. Enlisting could, Laver suggests, ‘authenticate the civic virtue of those who embraced the competition and selfishness of the market economy’ (ibid: 15). Here, the complex interrelationships between agriculture, commerce and conceptions of ‘virtue’ in post-revolutionary America, as outlined by J.G.A Pocock in his seminal *The Machiavellian Moment*, is implicit (Pocock 1975). More pertinently, if Southern strains of traditional civic virtue comprised of ‘manly’ pride, fierce patriotism, expressions of military competence, independence, a humble agrarian ‘work ethic’ and ‘success’ in the domestic sphere, then the poetry and persona of Burns was ripe for appropriation on various levels.

Evidence of the memory of Burns functioning to articulate Southern ideals of masculinity can be found in a recent biography of Confederate colonel William Calvin Oates (1835-1910), largely remembered as the officer defeated at Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg. The biography, written by Glenn W. LaFantasie and published by Oxford University Press in 2006, was based on the exclusive access of family papers and thus delved into the previously unexplored personal life of the confederate soldier. LaFantasie notes how Oates regularly ‘called to mind some lines written by his favourite poet, Robert Burns’ whenever ‘the romance of war flooded

his emotions' (LaFantasie, 2006: 75) thus tying Burns to a heavily romanticised, masculine military experience. LaFantasie also suggests that Oates 'manufactured and crafted' his identity in later life in accordance with 'Southern manly ideals' which explained his frequent 'waxing romantic by quoting Burns' whenever he was 'inspired by the Shenandoah women' (ibid: 40). An 1852 article in the Virginia-based *Daily Dispatch* similarly described Burns as 'extremely gallant, always in love, and a great favourite with the ladies' while acknowledging—notably without any trace of moral judgement—how 'the susceptible heart of the poet was bandied from one to the other' ([Anon] 1852). Joseph Du Rant has recently undertaken a useful comparative study of the way Burns was portrayed in Northern and Southern Antebellum newspapers. Most powerfully, Du Rant notes that articles on Burns regularly appear within pages—at times on the same page—as advertisements selling 'Negroes' and notices of 'captured' slaves. Du Rant makes the overall point that Burns as a symbol of universal equality—so widely remembered by Douglass and the Northern abolitionists—does not seem to have any presence in the Southern newspapers (Du Rant 2016: 26-33). Rather, Burns is portrayed akin to a charismatic Southern white male complete with all the admirable trappings of idealised masculinity. In a slightly absurd parable in the pro-slavery *Daily Dispatch*, this selective Southern commemoration of Burns appears explicit:

Robert Burns, on his way to Leith one morning met a country farmer: he shook him earnestly by the hand and stopped to converse a while. A young Edinburgh blood took the poet to task for this defect of taste. 'Why, you fantastic,' said Burns, 'it was not the great coat, the scone bonnet, and the saundaer boot hose, I spoke to, but the man that was in them; and the man, sir, for worth would weigh down you and me, and ten more any such day.'

([Anon] 1853)

Though Burns's egalitarian virtues are hinted at here, the parable also smacks of traditional Southern discourses of masculinity. It is not the city-dwelling 'blood', tainted by individualism, materialism and a market economy that reigns supreme, but rather the honourable agrarian concerned with community and honour. The fact of him being a 'country farmer' is also notable. Farming, in particular manual labour, was predominantly undertaken by slaves in the period, and they were rarely referred to as 'farmers'. Thus, the 'country farmer' that the imagined Burns speaks highly of seems to resemble a Southern white plantation overseer; a darkly ironic posthumous cultural appropriation given the poet's early intentions to emigrate to Jamaica.

By far the least palatable form of Southern Burns commemoration, however, came in Pulaski, Tennessee after the defeat of the confederacy in 1865. In his empirical outlining of how cultural memories are articulated, Jan Assmann cites 'rites' and 'rituals' as being a primary method of preservation (Assmann 2008: 118). In a ceremonial induction lacking in any true sense of 'honour' or 'integrity', Burns's 'To a Louse' was incorporated into being a rite of initiation for potential new members of the freshly formed white supremacist fraternity, the Ku Klux Klan:

A skullcap with donkey's ears sewn on it was placed on the head of a candidate, who was then escorted to a large dressing mirror the Klan dubbed as 'the royal altar' and ordered to recite a poem written by Scotsman Robert Burns. The blindfold was then removed to reveal to the candidate that he'd literally been dressed up as an ass, much to the amusement of the Klansmen.

The embarrassed man could then accept or deny membership. Most agreed to join with those in the financially depressed rural areas showing a particular interest. (Gitlin 2009: 52)

Furthermore, the original 'Prescript of the **' (the first constitutional document of the Ku Klux Klan) also reveals a Burnsian influence. Printed secretly in the office of the *Pulaski Citizen* in 1867, the prescript begins with two unattributed literary quotes; Shakespeare's Hamlet ('What may this mean,/That thou, dead corse...') and an altered stanza from Burns's 'Address to the Deil':

An' now auld Cloots, I ken ye're thinkin',
A certain *Ghoul* is rantin', drinkin',
Some luckless night will send him linkin',
To your black pit;
But, faith! he'll turn a corner jinkin',
An' cheat you yet. [Anon] 1867)

Here, Burns's original use of 'Bardie's rantin, drinkin' is replaced with 'Ghoul' to denote the white-cloaked members of the organisation who, as outlined in the document, were to meet in 'Dens' under the command of the 'Grand Wizard of the Empire.' The mock-imperial language of the constitution also provides a possible clue to the constitutional choice of 'Address to the Deil'. Originally appearing in the 'Kilmarnock edition' of 1786, Burns's poem is more burlesque than god-fearing through its proverbial register, Scots idiom and comic derision of the devil as 'Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Clootie' (Burns [1786]: 1.168). While the Devil is, of course, a time-honoured habitué of Scottish writing, from William Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sins' through James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Burns's 'Deil'—in this poem at least—is more comical folk-trickster than malevolent genius, and is thus in keeping with thus in keeping with, comical fraternal initiation rites.⁵ While the Devil is, of course, a time-honoured habitué of Scottish writing, from William Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sins' through James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Burns's 'Deil' is more comical folk-trickster than malevolent genius, thus chiming with the burlesque tones of the fraternal initiation rite. That ritual humiliation is linked to developing fraternal identity is well established, with Jan Koster noting that 'speaking in choruses', 'common dress' and a general 'collectivizing of physical appearance' can also be key elements to the symbolic unification of emergent groups (Koster 2003: 218). In the case of the emergent Ku Klux Klan, the shared humiliation of being 'dressed up as an ass' (itself a uniting experience) and incorporation of comic Scottish lines in a constitution may well have shored up a sense of genealogical unity, exceptionalism and, indeed, supremacy. Yet transposed to the context of a white secessionist fraternity, darker hermeneutic undertones also emerge in Burns's largely comical 'Address to the Deil'. Where Burns's ranting 'bardie' expressed hope for salvation from the devil's 'black pit', the juxtaposition of a white 'Ghoul' in the constitutional adaption evokes racial undertones. That is, the devil's 'black pit', in the context of

⁵. For more on Burns, the Devil, and Scottish writing, see Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 190-194.

this document, is quite possibly linked to a degenerative black or African experience that the 'Ghoul' must 'cheat'.

Speculative as this reading may be, the question of why Burns's poetry was adopted by vengeful Confederate veterans, intent on venting their frustrations on African-Americans is not easy to answer. On one hand, the first Ku Klux Klan initiation ceremony might be viewed as mere comical farce in its primary purpose of entertaining and solidifying bonds between existing members of the organisation. In this view, Burns (and his poem) may not have been considered as holding any major thematic or political significance in relation to white supremacist ideals. The recitation of the lines ('O wad some Power the giftie gie us/To see oursel's as ithers see us!') complied perfectly with the 'light-hearted' prank which culminated in the potential new member finally seeing himself (humiliated) in a large dressing mirror 'as ithers' did: literally dressed up as an ass. This base appropriation is highly ironic given Burns was partly glossing Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in verse form (Manning 2013: 251). Furthermore, the founding members did not necessarily need to have a great deal of familiarity with Burns's wider oeuvre and poetic sensibilities to include the poem whilst devising their 'comical' initiation rite. The two lines, taken from the final stanza of the poem, had by this period long evolved into a popular proverb with evidence of it being used in other humorous contexts in the American South. An 1859 advertisement in the *Daily Dispatch*, for example, quoted the lines before promoting 'photographs', 'pearl ambrotypes' and 'patent leather pictures' by an artist who 'paints the face to-day' ([Anon] 1859) with the comical emphasis being on how technological advances in photography (the daguerreotype) meant that individuals might now see themselves as 'ithers' did ('The gift is made that Burns was wont to find') (ibid).

Yet wholly reducing the Ku Klux Klan 'rite' to mere farce would be ignorant of both the constitutional use of 'Address to the Deil', and more broadly the extent to which Scottish writers, images and icons played an important part in shaping the identity of Southern extremists. A recent essay by Andrew Hook discusses how ex-confederate soldiers often drew on parallels between the loss of 'Highland' culture in eighteenth-century Scotland and the loss of Southern independence after the Civil War (Hook 2005: 217). This formed a mould for the foundational identity of various Southern far-right groups such as the League of the South, the John Birch Society and the anti-semitic Christian Identity; all of whom drew on selective interpretations of Scottish history to justify their defence of what they see as their threatened white Anglo-Celtic culture. Hook has elsewhere summarised that there is 'general agreement' that the final version of the flag 'was meant to be seen as incorporating the blue St Andrews cross of the Scottish Saltire (Hook 2016). This is particularly resonant in light of the recent debates over the origins and continued use of the Confederate Flag ignited by the racially-motivated 2015 shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Another fact relating to Burns and Southern white extremism is that the first president of the Burns Club of Atlanta (Hamilton Douglas) was 'a staunch advocate of both white supremacy and the Democratic Party's white primary' (Spritzer 2008: 5). While the club's only qualification for membership upon its inception was 'good citizenship' and 'admiration and love for the great poet' (Garrett 2010: 340), it is highly doubtful that such citizenship extended to the African-Americans that Douglas was actively attempting to disenfranchise.

Returning to the first incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan (1865-1874), the very employment of the word 'clan' with its dualistic connotations of both a sense of 'lost'

(Highland and Southern) society is also notable and might easily be linked to the Scots ancestry of members. As Michael Morris notes, the ‘second’ Klan (1915-1944) ‘adopted its gruesome icon of the burning cross from the third canto of Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* [...] in which Highland clans are summoned by a Fiery Cross’ (Morris 2015: 172). In her insightful articulations on ‘the principle of scarcity’ and cultural memory, Rigney states that one of the ways ‘emergent groups’ confirm their identity ‘as group is by celebrating and reinforcing their sense of a common past’ (Rigney 2005: 23). Rigney further suggest that ‘the sense of sharing memories, of having a past in common, is arguably a precondition for the emergence of such groups in the first place’ (ibid). Taken as an emergent group formed from the ashes of the Civil War, then, we might see why the six founding members of the Ku Klux Klan would draw upon their perceived sense of heritage.

Southern historian Grady McWhiney has previously gone so far as to (perhaps questionably) suggest that the cultural difference between the South and the rest of the United States is predominantly due to the South’s Celtic cultural heritage (McWhiney 1998). Even if McWhiney’s argument is only partially true, the Klan’s appropriation of Burns was clearly embedded within a much wider, Southern tradition, fully developing after the Civil War, of drawing on Scottish and culture to articulate and maintain ties to a distinctly white, often supremacist, identity.

Conclusion

As noted in my introduction, the examples in this article are purposefully polarising, and serve to underline the concept of ‘palimpsestuous’ memories of Burns in nineteenth-century America. As the century progressed, new inscriptions would add further layers to the ‘Burnsian Palimpsest’, such as the erection of statues, adoption and appropriation of songs or widely publicised commentaries by influential figures such as Walt Whitman, John Muir and Andrew Carnegie. Pertaining to Winter’s sense of a palimpsest being ‘reused or altered’ but not erasing earlier inscriptions, these instances of commemoration allowed for further diversity of interpretation that underlined simultaneous, polyphonic meanings whilst, in some way, preserving the memory of Burns. Where the naturalist, philosopher and saviour of ‘America’s wild places’ John Muir would inscribe a memory of Burns as a most ecologically sensitive poet (Colwell 2014: 128); Carnegie promoted the poet as a symbol of egalitarian learning through his philanthropic contributions. Consistently, the ‘Burnsian Palimpsest’, in accordance with the fluid nature of transnational sites of cultural memory, variously preserves contested narratives; divergent ideologies; plural identities; multiple appropriations and contradictory national histories; whilst, all the while, retaining a trace of the original memory source—Robert Burns.

In addition to underlining a plurality of Burns commemorations in nineteenth-century America, these contrasting appropriations also alert us to the advantages of sectional, or regionally specific, approaches *within* transnational and transatlantic literary contexts. Christopher Hanlon employs the term ‘Atlantic sectionalism’ to describe how, in the antebellum period, assertions of transatlantic connectedness frequently ‘entwined polemics over states’ rights and federalism, northern and southern lineage, secession and union, slavery and freedom’ (Hanlon 2013: preface, x). On the specific issue of American slavery and its relationship to England, Hanlon further states:

Public intellectuals in the United States could not but refer the terms of the

national conflict over slavery to England—whose abolition of slavery throughout the empire in 1833 pressured conservative U.S. discourses as well as voices of liberal dissent—but rather than doing so directly and literally, these partisans tended to codify their antipathies for one another in terms of complicated engagements with various constructions of English history, race, geography, and political economy. (ibid: preface, xi)

Here, opposing sectional entities shored up political beliefs through a subjective transatlantic connection to a reconstituted mother country. Expanding this concept, the reception and memory of transatlantic literature (and literary figures) in nineteenth-century America might also benefit from a greater awareness of patterns of ‘Atlantic sectionalism’. As demonstrated above, the subjective reconstruction of Burns by Douglass and the Ku Klux Klan provides a useful example of how the same poet was simultaneously appropriated to articulate conflicting sectional values. That is, strains of American identity were expressed through a connection, whether racial, ideological, or otherwise, to a transatlantic poet and his works.

What is clear, in the specific case of Burns, is that the popular and abiding narrative of him being remembered as the embodiment of ‘national American’ values must evolve to consider the sectional intricacies of transatlantic literature in the nineteenth-century.

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